A GREATER ONE THAN JONAH IS HERE · WEEK 1

An Assignment of Hope

November 29, 2026 · Jonah 1 · Pastor Terra Penninga

THE BIG IDEA

The hope of Jesus extends to those who are disobedient, those who are affected by the sin of others, and those who are still far from him. God is so committed to his redemptive purposes that he assigns Jesus to save us even in the middle of human rebellion, spiritual opposition and suffering.

This guide works two ways. On your own, take one section a day through the week, or use the daily readings near the end. In a group, plan on about an hour: read the chapter aloud, talk through the background, then pick the questions that fit your group. Nobody has to answer every one.

Read **Jonah 1** at least twice, once quietly and once aloud. It's only seventeen verses, and it moves fast. Then read **Matthew 12:38–41**, where Jesus talks about Jonah himself.

This is the first week of Advent and the first week of a new series, *A Greater One Than Jonah Is Here*. Over the four Sundays of Advent we're walking through the four chapters of Jonah, one each week, alongside the four Advent themes of hope, peace, joy and love. Pastor Terra Penninga opened the series with Jonah 1 and the theme of hope.

Get talking

When you were a kid, what chore or job did you go to the greatest lengths to get out of? Did it work?

Where this passage sits

Jonah is one of the shortest books among the prophets, and it's different from the rest. Most prophetic books are collections of the prophet's messages. Jonah is mostly a story about the prophet himself, and he doesn't come off well. He's arguably one of the most disobedient prophets in all of Scripture, and his story still made it into the Bible.

The only other place the Old Testament mentions Jonah is 2 Kings 14:25. There he is "Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher," who announced that King Jeroboam II would win back Israel's lost territory. That

happened, and Israel enjoyed a stretch of strength and prosperity. The prophet Amos preached in the same years with a harder message: judgment, defeat and exile were coming. Both men's words came true, Jonah's sooner and Amos's later.

Nineveh was a great city of the Assyrian empire, on the Tigris River in what is now northern Iraq. Assyria was the power that would later overrun Israel's northern kingdom (2 Kings 17:5–6), and its armies were known for cruelty. Assyrian kings boasted in their own inscriptions of torturing captives and putting their enemies' bodies on display. Then God tells an Israelite prophet to go there.

Centuries later the Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign, and he pointed them to Jonah: "The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here" (Matthew 12:41). That's where this series gets its name, and it's how a book about a runaway prophet connects to Advent. All of Scripture points to Jesus. Jonah shows us a God who moves toward a world that is running from him, and in Advent we remember that he came to us in his Son.

A few words worth a closer look

"Jonah son of Amittai" (Jonah 1:1)

Jonah means "dove," and *Amittai* comes from the Hebrew word for truth, so the name reads something like "Dove, son of truth." God gives Jonah his assignment on the basis of who he is, not on the basis of his attitude.

"Nineveh" (Jonah 1:2)

A leading city of Assyria, Israel's feared enemy. For an Israelite, it was the last place anyone expected God to send mercy.

"Tarshish" (Jonah 1:3)

A distant port far to the west across the Mediterranean, possibly in Spain, somewhere around 2,500 miles from Joppa. Nineveh lay to the east. Jonah heads as far the other way as a ship could take him.

"Paying the fare" (Jonah 1:3)

Jonah doesn't only ignore God; he spends his own money to go the other way.

"Went down" (Jonah 1:3, Jonah 1:5)

The same Hebrew verb runs through the chapter: Jonah goes *down* to Joppa, *down* into the ship and *down* into the hold to sleep. Running from God is a long way down.

"Lots" (Jonah 1:7)

A common way in the ancient world of asking a god to decide. Here the Lord uses the sailors' own method to point to Jonah.

"Provided" (Jonah 1:17)

The word means to appoint or assign. God *assigns* a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and he'll use the same word later in the book for a plant, a worm and a wind (Jonah 4:6–8). The text calls it a "huge fish," and Jesus uses a general word for a sea creature (Matthew 12:40). Whatever it was, God sent it to keep Jonah alive.

1 A rebellious, disobedient prophet

READ Jonah 1:1–3 and 2 Kings 14:25

God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and announce his judgment, because he has seen how wicked its people are. Jonah doesn't want to do it. Pastor Terra suggested he was proud and probably afraid, and he didn't think the Ninevites deserved a prophet, a chance to repent or a chance to know God.

So he runs, and notice where. He doesn't go anywhere wicked. A prophet booking passage on a long voyage wouldn't have raised many eyebrows; prophets were known to be a little odd anyway. Pastor Terra's point was that our disobedience often looks like this. God asks us to do something we don't want to do, for any number of reasons, and we choose something else: not something bad, just not what he asked. She gave her own example. When God asks her to speak to someone, she is tempted to pray silently instead, and sometimes the other way around. Discernment, as she put it, isn't always knowing right from wrong; it's knowing right from almost right.

Here is the encouraging part. God didn't cancel Jonah's assignment because Jonah ran. He didn't hand it to a more willing prophet. He met Jonah in the middle of the sea, and he assigned a fish to keep him alive (Jonah 1:17). Jonah's behavior changed; his identity before God did not. The same is true for anyone who belongs to Jesus. God sees you as his beloved son or daughter, not as the sum of your successes and failures. That isn't permission to keep running. It's the reason you can stop.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh? Which of his reasons can you understand?
2. Jonah paid the fare to go the other way. What does it cost us when we run from what God has asked?
3. Read Jonah 1:1–3 again. What would "something not bad, just not what God asked" look like in your own life?
4. Pastor Terra said discernment is knowing right from almost right. Where have you had trouble telling the two apart?
5. God gave Jonah his assignment based on who he was, not on how he acted. How does that change the way you think about your own failures?
6. Is there something God has asked of you that you've been sailing away from? What's one step back toward it?

2 A violent city God had not overlooked

READ Jonah 1:2 and Matthew 12:38–41

Nineveh was known for extreme violence. Its armies terrorized the cities they conquered, and Assyrian kings boasted of what they did to their captives. It is hard to imagine a place more set against God.

Pastor Terra asked whether that is as far from our own setting as we'd like to think. Our country is marked by power, prosperity and influence as much as by moral corruption, violence and godlessness. She used a little imagination here, and she said so. Surely there were people in Nineveh who looked around and thought, "What are we doing? I can only hope someone can deliver us from the doing of our own hands."

The Ninevites were spiritually opposed to God, but they were not overlooked by him. He sent them a prophet. Jesus said they would stand up at the judgment because “they repented at the preaching of Jonah” (Matthew 12:41). The last place anyone expected God to show up was the place he was already headed.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do you know about Nineveh and Assyria from this guide or elsewhere? Why would an Israelite dread going there?

2. Pastor Terra compared Nineveh with our own culture. Where do you see the same mix of power and darkness today?

3. Have you ever felt sick at heart about the culture around you? What did you do with that feeling?

4. God saw Nineveh’s wickedness and still sent a messenger. What does that tell you about him?

5. Is there a person or a place you’ve quietly decided is too far gone for God? What would it mean to pray for them this week?

3 Sailors caught in someone else's storm

READ Jonah 1:4–16 and Isaiah 53:4–6

The sailors were experienced men on a long voyage, with sails and oars and no engines. They were used to rough weather and used to strangers coming aboard. They weren’t following the Lord; they prayed to their own gods. But they were quicker than Jonah to recognize that this storm was no ordinary storm. While they prayed and threw cargo overboard, the prophet of the Lord was asleep below deck.

Pastor Terra pointed out how different this is from the scene in the Gospels where Jesus sleeps in a boat during a storm (Mark 4:35–41). There, Jesus wakes and speaks, and the sea goes still. Here, it takes lots, a confession and finally a sacrifice: the sailors throw Jonah overboard, and the sea grows calm.

The sailors were minding their own business, and they became collateral damage of someone else’s disobedience. Many of us know that experience. A parent’s choices, a spouse’s, a boss’s, even a pastor’s, and a storm hits that you did not cause. Notice what the sailors did: they cried out. Desperation has a way of making us honest. And notice what God did: he used the storm to reveal himself, and the men who had prayed to other gods ended the chapter fearing the Lord and offering him a sacrifice (Jonah 1:16).

The sailors had to make a sacrifice to see the storm end. We already have a Savior who gave himself. Pastor Terra heard in their story an echo of Isaiah 53: “Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows” (Isaiah 53:4, NKJV).

A word of care: God being at work in a storm you didn’t cause doesn’t make the harm good, or mean you should stay quiet about it. If someone is harming you, tell someone you trust and get help.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. The sailors recognized the storm faster than Jonah did. Why do you think the prophet slept?
2. Who else in your life has been affected by your choices, for good or ill?
3. Have you been caught in a storm you didn't cause? What has it been like?
4. The sailors "cried out." What does honest, desperate prayer sound like for you?
5. Read Jonah 1:16. How did the storm become the way these men came to know the Lord?
6. Pastor Terra said, "God has not missed it." What would change if you believed that about your own storm?

Hope was already assigned

READ Isaiah 9:2 and Matthew 12:39–41

Pastor Terra hopes we'll see ourselves, at least a little, in every character of the story. All of them are walking in darkness, waiting on hope and peace and joy and love, even if they don't know it. Isaiah's promise is for all of them: "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light" (Isaiah 9:2, NLT).

If you're running, have hope that God is still pursuing you. If you're in a storm that isn't your fault, have hope that God sees you and is at work in it. If you're far from God, have hope that you are not too far for a God who sends fish, storms and prophets to reach you.

And remember where the series started. Jonah was a reluctant messenger; Jesus is the willing One. Jonah ran away from his assignment; Jesus ran toward his, all the way to the cross and out of the tomb. Jonah's assignment was a warning of judgment; Jesus' assignment is the offer of salvation. That's what Advent waits for: not only a baby in a manger, but the Greater One, whose assignment was hope for the disobedient, the storm-tossed and the far away.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Which character in Jonah 1 do you relate to most right now: Jonah, the sailors or the people of Nineveh? Why?
2. Read the three "have hope" sentences above. Which one do you most need to hear this Advent?
3. Who do you know who needs that same hope? How might you carry it to them?

Wrap up

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Which step from this week, or the "Try this" practice below, would you like this group to ask you about next time?

2. How can we pray for each other before we meet again?

Through the week

☐	**Monday**	Jonah 1. Read the chapter again and notice every time someone goes "down." Ask God where you may be heading away from him.
☐	**Tuesday**	Mark 4:35–41. Compare Jesus asleep in the storm with Jonah asleep in the storm. Bring Jesus one fear you're carrying.
☐	**Wednesday**	Isaiah 9:1–7. Read the promise of light in the darkness. Thank God for the light Jesus has brought into your life.
☐	**Thursday**	Isaiah 53:1–6. Read slowly about the One who carried our sorrows. Give him a grief or sorrow you've been carrying alone.
☐	**Friday**	Jonah 2. Read ahead to next Sunday's chapter. Notice where Jonah prays from, and what he says.

Try this

Each morning this week, before you start your day, ask God one question: "Is there something you've asked me to do that I've been putting off or doing almost right?" When something comes to mind, such as a person to talk to, a call to make or a prayer to pray, do that one thing that day. Write down what happens.

Close in prayer

Father, you pursued Jonah when he ran, you saw the sailors in a storm they didn't cause, and you sent a prophet to a city everyone else had given up on. Thank you that you pursue us too. Forgive us where we've run from what you asked, meet us in the storms we didn't choose, and give us hope for the people we've written off. As we wait this Advent, help us welcome Jesus, the Greater One, who came running toward his assignment for us. In his name we pray. Amen.

Notes

Watch the sermon online

Scan the code or visit **pathwaywes.com/sermons/an-assignment-of-hope** for the video, this guide and Pastor Bart's blog post on this week's message.

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